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NATIONAL OCEANIC AND
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

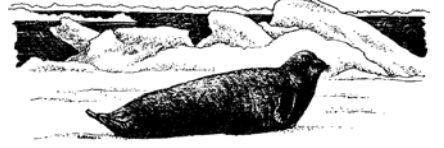


NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE, ALASKA REGION

Ice Seals: Frequently Asked Questions

1) What are ice seals and why are they called that?

- In Alaska, “ice seals” is a general term often used to refer to ringed, bearded, ribbon, and spotted seals.
- These species are called ice seals because they give birth to their pups on the sea ice and they rely on sea ice for nursing, rearing, molting, feeding, and resting during some part of the year. Each ice seal species is uniquely adapted to use specific types of sea ice in different ways.



2) Who is the National Marine Fisheries Service?

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is the federal government agency responsible for research, management, and conservation of whales, dolphins, porpoises, seals, and sea lions. Our Alaska regional offices are located in Juneau and Anchorage, AK, and our marine mammal laboratory is in Seattle, WA.

3) Who is the Ice Seal Committee and how do they co-manage ice seals?

The Ice Seal Committee (ISC) is an Alaska Native organization dedicated to conserving ice seal populations, habitat, and hunting, and to preserving Native cultures and traditions. The ISC co-manages ice seals with NMFS by monitoring subsistence harvest and cooperating on needed research and education programs pertaining to ice seals.

4) Have ice seals been listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA)?

- **Ringed and Bearded Seals:** In December 2012, NMFS listed three subspecies of ringed seals and two distinct population segments (DPSs) of bearded seals, including those that occur in Alaska, as threatened under the ESA. Ladoga ringed seals, which occur in Lake Ladoga, Russia, were listed as endangered.
- **Spotted Seals:** In October 2009, NMFS determined that listing under the ESA was not warranted for the Okhotsk and Bering DPSs of spotted seals, including those in Alaska. NMFS listed the southern DPS of spotted seals (Yellow Sea and Sea of Japan) as threatened under the ESA in October 2010.
- **Ribbon Seals:** In December 2011, NMFS announced the initiation of a status review of ribbon seals to determine whether they should be listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA. This review will update a previous review completed in December 2008.

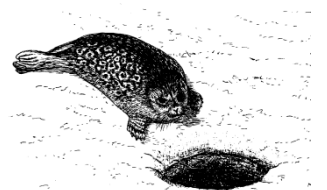


5) What is critical habitat, and has it been designated for ringed and bearded seals in Alaska?

- Under the ESA, critical habitat is defined as specific geographic areas that contain the physical and biological features essential to the conservation of the species and that may require special management considerations or protections. Before critical habitat is designated, careful consideration is given to impacts of the designation on specific geographic areas, including potential economic impacts and impacts on national security.
- A critical habitat designation does not set up a preserve or refuge and only applies to situations where federal funding, permits, or projects are involved. Federal agencies must ensure that any actions they authorize, fund, or carry out are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species, or destroy or adversely modify its designated critical habitat.
- The ESA requires that NMFS designate critical habitat for species that have been listed as threatened or endangered at the time of listing, or within one year if it is not determinable at that time. At the time of listing, existing information was lacking to identify and describe essential features of the habitat of ringed and bearded seals, as well as information on the economic impacts of designating critical habitat for these species in Alaska. Consequently, critical habitat is being designated in subsequent rulemaking. NMFS will solicit comments from the public on the proposed critical habitat designations, as well as on an economic analysis of the critical habitat proposals, before final decision are made on the designations.

5) What are the main reasons why ringed and bearded seals in Alaska have been listed as threatened under the ESA?

- Under the ESA, a threatened species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. An endangered species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.
- Ringed and bearded seals are particularly dependent upon ice and snow for survival. Many aspects of the ringed and bearded seal's life cycles depend on the availability of suitable ice, and for ringed seals snow cover, at the right time of the year in areas with sufficient food.
- Climate models consistently project diminishing ice and snow cover at least through the current century, with regional variation in the timing and severity of those losses.
- Although ringed and bearded seals are currently numerous in Alaska, NMFS has concluded that the changes in ice, and for ringed seals snow cover, are likely to lead to population declines in the foreseeable future and pose significant long-term threats to the persistence of these seals.



6) Are Alaska Natives still able to hunt ringed and bearded seals for subsistence purposes now that they are listed as threatened under the ESA?

- Yes. The ESA allows for subsistence harvest of listed species by Alaska Natives, so long as it is not done in a wasteful manner.
- NMFS does not anticipate that the listings will lead to any regulation of subsistence hunting. Currently, the subsistence harvest of ice seals by Alaska Natives appears to be sustainable and does not pose a threat to the populations.
- Subsistence hunting may be regulated under the ESA, but only if the harvest is expressly found to “materially and negatively” affect the species. NMFS would have to provide notice and hold an administrative hearing on the record for any such regulations.

7) We have limits on many subsistence resources but not ice seals. Will this change?

If ice seal populations declined to very low levels over time, limits could be put on the subsistence harvest of them. If the current situation changes, NMFS will work under the co-management agreement with the ISC to find the best approach to ensure that sustainable subsistence harvest of ice seals by Alaska Natives continues.

8) If restrictions were placed on hunting ringed or bearded seals, would other activities that may affect them, such as commercial fishing, be restricted?

The ESA requires that NMFS develop recovery plans for listed species, unless such a plan will not promote the conservations of the species. A recovery plan provides a blueprint of actions needed to prevent the extinction of a listed species and the appropriate course of action needed to recover the species to the point that protection is no longer needed under the ESA. This plan may recommend restrictions on activities which are shown to prevent or slow the recovery of the species. NMFS must consider many activities that may affect a listed species, including fishing, oil and gas activities, and subsistence harvest.

9) Who can I contact for more information?

- Barbara Mahoney (biologist) - National Marine Fisheries Service (Anchorage): (907) 271-3448
- Tammy Olson (biologist) – National Marine Fisheries Service (Anchorage): (907) 271-2373
- The NMFS Alaska Region Web Site: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/>

